

The Piano Lesson by August Wilson
Background Information

Name _____
Period 1A 4A 1B 2B

Instructions: Please visit the following websites and answer the questions using the information found on the website. Answer questions completely and be prepared to discuss in class. You can also find the links to each site at <http://olympusbishop.wikispaces.com/THE+PIANO+LESSON+Historical-Social+Context>

Topic/Question(s):	Response:
<p>1. <i>August Wilson</i>: (A) List three facts discovered about Wilson's life. (B) What is "The Pittsburgh Cycle"? (C) List two (2) themes often found in Wilson's works (consider themes that interest YOU).</p> <p>http://www.biography.com/people/august-wilson-9533583 www.augustwilson.net (click on plays & bio, then Slide Show)</p>	<p>A. - - - B. C.</p>
<p>2. <i>Romare Bearden</i> (esp. his artwork titled <i>The Piano Lesson</i>): (A) Give a brief summary of his life as an artist. (B) What is the significance of his work titled <i>The Piano Lesson</i>?</p> <p>http://www.beardenfoundation.org/ https://olneypianolesson.wordpress.com/about/romare-bearden/ www.augustwilson.net</p>	<p>A. B.</p>
<p>3. <i>Stagger Lee</i>: (A) Briefly summarize the background story for this song (1895). (B) Identify four different artists who have recorded this song. Provide year of recording. (C) What does this song express?</p> <p>http://www.staggerlee.com/</p>	<p>A. B. C.</p> <p>D. In Act 2, Wining Boy is trying to sell some of his old clothes to Lymon. He says about some shoes "Them's the kind Stagger Lee wore." What do you think he's trying to say? What do you guess about Wining Boy based on this reference?</p>

4. *The Great Migration (African-Americans in the 20th Century)*: (A) Why did African-Americans migrate from the south to northern and Midwestern cities? Give three reasons. (B) List three (3) areas A-A originally settled during the first. (C) Where did A-A settle during the second migration? (D) What was the significance of the Black Press?

<http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/segregation/p/Causes-Of-The-Great-Migration-Searching-For-The-Promised-Land.htm>

<http://www.inmotionaame.org/migrations/topic.cfm;jsessionid=f8303249561431700847482?migration=8&topic=3&tab=image&bhcp=1>

A. –

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B.

C.

D.

E. In Act 1, the men are sitting around the table having a drink. Boy Willie and Lymon are visiting Pittsburgh from Mississippi. Lymon says he's thinking he might stay. Boy Willie says Lymon can stay, but he's going back. You've read about why people migrated—why do you think anyone would want to go back South?

<p>5. <i>America in the 1930s</i>: (A) How was the 1930s characterized in American society? (B) What was happening with unemployment at this time? (C) What happened to farmers/laborers at this time? (D) What was Hoover's response to the economic depression plaguing American society? (E) What was Roosevelt's New Deal Plan? Why did he owe his election success in part to the A-A community?</p> <p>https://americanstage.org/pdfs/The-Piano-Lesson-Study-Guide.pdf - PAGES 18-19 http://www.history.com/topics/1930s</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C.</p> <p>D.</p> <p>E.</p> <p>IN THE PLAY: The characters in this play, set in 1936, are generally doing quite well. One character, a self-described "Ramblin' Man" doesn't seem to want a job. The two young men visiting from the South don't have current employment but we know from watching <i>Slavery by Another Name</i> that this probably isn't their choice. The other characters, though, are employed and seem to be doing all right financially. While African-Americans in the 1930's struggled through the Great Depression like everyone else, ironically many of them (especially those in predominantly urban black neighborhoods) fared better financially than others. Why do you think that may be so?</p>
<p>6. <i>African-American Life during the Great Depression (1930s)</i>: (A) Where did A-A find their cultural identity in the 1930s? (B) What irony existed in regards to music? (C) Summarize what was happening in the south in the 1930s.</p> <p>https://americanstage.org/pdfs/The-Piano-Lesson-Study-Guide.pdf http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/uhic/ReferenceDetailsPage/DocumentToolsPortletWindow?displayGroupName=Reference&jsid=7812016b5ea4d6684ea4837e2c6ef921&action=2&catId=&documentId=GALE CX3404500017&u=sand55832&zid=b57acc008e359910d5c24de390bb447b http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_depression.html http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C.</p> <p>D. IN THE PLAY: The play is NOT a musical, but there are three major "musical numbers" in it. Obviously there is music throughout too, given the title of the play and the central focus on the family piano. Given the information you just read, what predictions about the family and their music do you have?</p>

<p>7. <i>Pittsburgh, PA's "Hill District", 1930s-1940s:</i> (A) What is the Hill District? (B) What did poet Claude McKay once call the district? (C) Identify three (3) impacts of the Hill District in the 1930s.</p> <p>https://americanstage.org/pdfs/The-Piano-Lesson-Study-Guide.pdf http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/2000/Beauty/Crawford.htm http://unblight.com/post/17205385824/hill-district-the-crossroads-of-the-world http://www.rtpittsburgh.org/hill-district/</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C. –</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p> <p>D. IN THE PLAY, most of the Charles family lives in the Hill District. What does this suggest about them?</p>
<p>8. <i>The GRIOT:</i> (A) Define the term “griot”. (B) Discuss how their function in society has evolved (past to present).</p> <p>http://news.psu.edu/story/140694/2002/05/01/research/keepers-history</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B. Past:</p> <p>Present:</p> <p>C. IN THE PLAY: August Wilson has been called the “griot” of the African-American people. What do you think that means? What expectations does that give you concerning this play?</p>
<p>9. <i>Parchman Farm:</i> (A) Where is Parchman Farm? (B) Why did folklorists come to Parchman Farm in the 1930s? (C) How did the farm operate for several decades? (D) What did Alan & John Lomax, Herbert Halpert, & William Ferris discover in the 1930s?</p> <p>www.msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/parchman-farm</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C.</p> <p>D.</p> <p>E. IN THE PLAY, Lymon says he’s staying in Mississippi. He and Boy Willie tease each other about being wanted in Mississippi. Lymon says “they had Boy Willie down on Parchman Farm” and Wining Boy replies that Parchman is “my old stompin’ grounds.” In 1936 (the setting of the play), Boy Willie is about 30 years old. Wining Boy is 56. How do you think these men ended up at Parchman Farm?</p>

<p>10. Chain Gang Songs: (A) Why did prisoners sing songs as they worked? (B) Why were they called “chain gang” songs?</p> <p>http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/2002/Music/Pages/worksongs.htm Berta, Berta (the song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxC04N23U3o Berta, Berta (lyrics) http://pancocojams.blogspot.com/2012/06/o-berta-prison-blues.html</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C. IN THE PLAY, as the men sit around the table sharing a drink, they sing a song, Berta, Berta. Find three elements of this song that show it is a prison song.</p>
<p>11. African-American work songs and field hollers: (A) Discuss the significance of the work song in the life of the African-American sharecropper. (B) What is the field holler? Who led the workers in song & what was a typical theme?</p> <p>http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/2002/Music/Pages/worksongs.htm</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p>
<p>12. The Yazoo Delta Railroad (The Yellow Dog): (A) Identify years of operation. (B) Why is it called the “Yellow Dog”? (C) What is the railroad’s significance in terms of blues music?</p> <p>http://www.earlyblues.com/Yellow%20Dog.htm http://www.mississippidelatarailroad.com/about.html http://www.mrjumbo.com/contents/delta99/3delta/moorhead.html</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C.</p> <p>D. A major symbol IN THE PLAY is “The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog.” The ghosts are the spirits of four men who were surrounded by a posse and murdered as they sat in a box car. What does it suggest that they were in a car on the Yazoo Delta Railroad? That is, why would most people take this railroad at all?</p>
<p>13. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (incl. A. Phillip Randolph): (A) Who were the Pullman Porters? (B) Who was A. Phillip Randolph? (C) What was extraordinary about this group?</p> <p>www.aphiliprandolphmuseum.com/evo_history4.html</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>C.</p> <p>D. IN THE PLAY, Uncle Doaker is a railroad worker. He was a young man in Mississippi before he came to Pittsburgh and got this job. How might a railroad job change Doaker’s outlook? What might his job suggest about Doaker?</p>

<p>14. W.C. Handy: (A) For what is W.C. Handy most well-known? (B) List three (3) facts about his life YOU find of great interest.</p> <p>http://www.biography.com/people/wc-handy-39700</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.-</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p>
<p>15. 1930s Slang ("Harlemese"): (A) List three (3) individuals who compiled/published slang glossaries in the 1930s. (B) Look through the glossary and write down seven (7) slang terms from the time period and what they mean.</p> <p>http://www.theharlemrenaissance.org/harlem_renaissance_slang.html http://aalbc.com/authors/harlemlang.htm</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.-</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p>
<p>16. Irene Kauffman Settlement House: (A) What is a "settlement house"? (B) What role did the Irene Kauffman house play for the people of Pittsburgh's Hill District?</p> <p>http://www.clpgh.org/exhibit/neighborhoods/hill/hill_n71.html</p>	<p>A.</p> <p>B.</p> <p>IN THE PLAY, Berniece tells her daughter Maretha she's not going to the bank with her: "Ain't no 'we.' We dropping you off at the settlement house." What do you guess Maretha will do at the settlement house?</p>
<p>17. Skip James (Nehemiah Curtis James): (A) List three interesting facts from his biography. (B) watch James sing "Illinois Blues": (C) Read the lyrics to "Illinois Blues"</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f67_CPSB4d4</p>	<p>IN THE PLAY, four lines from "Illinois Blues" are the epigraph of the play. An epigraph (literally meaning "outside writing") is a little quote, poem, lyric, or piece of text that serves to 'set the tone' for the story about to proceed. It should also 'enlighten' the reader once the story is finished as it will emphasize a theme, character, or other idea presented in the main piece.</p> <p>What do you guess about the play based on the epigraph (consider the lines themselves as well as the source)?</p>
<p>18. "The Old Ship of Zion" (listen to it) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZojzCEHzv0 Read the lyrics http://www.metrolyrics.com/old-ship-of-zion-lyrics-sweet-honey-in-the-rock.html</p>	<p>IN THE PLAY, Avery (a preacher and Berniece's suitor) encourages Berniece to go back to the piano she seems to be avoiding. This is the song he encourages her to play. Why might this particular song be the one Avery wants her to play (beyond the obvious connection that he's a preacher)? What might the lyrics suggest about this specific situation?</p>

